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## **Folkestone Futures: an elevated excursion**

### **Abstract**

The town of Folkestone on the south Kent coast in the UK once enjoyed a thriving identity as both seaside resort and gateway to Europe. From the 1960s onwards a gradual decline set in with the advent of mass global travel, culminating in the deathblow that was dealt by the nearby Eurotunnel's inauguration towards century's end, which signalled the end of the town's ferry link to the continental mainland.

A concerted attempt has been underway for a decade now to revitalise the town using the arts, creative industries and education as the drivers of regeneration. One of the main initiatives in this endeavour was the introduction in 2008 of the Folkestone Triennial, a three-month summer event in which high-profile international artists were commissioned to produce sited artworks for the town. Focusing on the third triennial in 2014, this article analyses some of the ways in which artists have sought to engage and identify with notions suggested by its title, *Lookout*. In particular it will outline a curated constellation of artworks – or complex – that implicitly inscribes itself into the townscape and is characterised by installations that are sited in elevated locations, from whose respective vantage points they contemplate what the future holds for Folkestone.

### **Keywords**

Folkestone Triennial, regeneration, public artworks, triangulation, urban futures

*Lookout* was the title of the third Folkestone Triennial, which took place over nine weeks in the late summer and early autumn of 2014. Fittingly the term resonates in a range of ways, suggesting, first, the figure of sentinel, whose gaze implicitly looks both ways: inwards to protect and ensure all is well, outwards to detect and avert any approaching danger. Second, it refers to the observation post or watch tower itself, an installation that aspires to offer an omniscient vantage point. And, third, it describes something for which one is personally liable, that constitutes one's business or responsibility. Of course, the noun can also be mined further for its verbal connotations: the imperative mood of a warning issued with urgency or, in slightly calmer mode: to resolve to be alert and prepared, to search for and find (something), or simply to scan a given, sometimes panoramic view. There is, moreover, an implied dialectic in the notion of 'looking out' between the fundamentally defensive tendency of (jealously) guarding something against potential threats on the one hand and that of projecting into the unknown and embracing the uncertainty of that which is spatio-temporally distant on the other.

With this we begin, within the context of the 2014 Folkestone Triennial, to get at one of the principal tensions in play in its thematic conception: the deliberately ambivalent ground of being rooted and place-bound, yet looking elsewhere for stimulus. Factoring in the role of the artist, *Lookout's* curator, Lewis Biggs, proposes the following model in the Triennial catalogue introduction:

We all constantly recalibrate our position (social, physical, intellectual, emotional) through our perspective on the world. From the known we gaze out over the unknown. We gain that perspective, that understanding, through

triangulation, the knowledge of two fixed points determining the position of a third.

(Biggs 2014, 4)

Such a triangulation implies that the Triennial's commissioned artworks 'necessarily start with a "position" given to them', first, 'by the historic and geographic context of their placement' and, second, by 'the aesthetic conditions of the materiality of their surroundings'. The third component in this composition is supplied by the artist who 'adds his or her proposition' (4). So, the artist-as-lookout draws attention to a spatio-temporal horizon that refers to both the promise and 'beyond' of other places and cultures – to that which we might welcome as new into our lives – and the imminent future: to that which may be some way off but nevertheless heading our way. Moreover, the lookout is, as Biggs concludes, 'integral to Folkestone's history as a port', so the place itself is uniquely 'exposed and sensitive to the global weather of economics, politics and migration. Art placed here can easily access this global weather, a weather that affects humanity as a whole' (4).

The trope of triangulation can be applied further by acknowledging that the perambulating viewer – plotting a route between sited artworks, or perhaps, as town resident, living immanently with certain ones – implicitly performs a form of self-directed curation across time and space. The plausibility of such a role validates itself inasmuch as the onus is on this interlocutor (spectator and/or citizen) to forge creative and intellectual links between artworks and place, the latter being, ultimately, what all the sited works have in common. Thus, an additional important triangulation arises in the

conceptual and embodied navigation between artwork, place and interlocutor, leading to the formation of a kind of urban cartography, or poetics of place, that may be merely personal – carried, as it were, in the being of the individual concerned – or that may find public expression (for example, in writing).

The intention with this article is to consider some of the ways in which commissioned artists have sought with their sited installations to engage and identify with the 2014 Triennial's theme and also to demonstrate how, when it comes to the future of urbanity, visions offered by artists are at least as valuable – and frequently 'ahead of the game', in fact – as the pragmatic, rationalist ones of scientists and engineers, which tend to be accorded privilege. In particular it will focus on a narrative strand or curated constellation of artworks – a complex, if you will – that implicitly inscribes itself into the townscape as a form of central spine, working its way back and forth between a point inland, where the town's gradient begins to rise up to Kent's North Downs, and, at sea level, its most southern tip at the end of the town's harbour pier. The featured artworks are characterised in their composition as a sculptural ensemble by the fact that they are all sited in elevated locations. Thus, they function in effect as a trail of beacons, marking out the lie of the land (and sea) while also striving to shed light on what the future may bring. What the article intends to show, however – and this is where the spectator's curation, or the writer's critical interpretation effectively comes into play – is that while these public installations demarcate the peaks of the built environment – figuratively signalling to one another on the one hand, seeking out the light like plant-life on the other<sup>N1</sup> – they can also be said to be *squatting* in their capacity as fixed-term 'interlopers', cheekily claiming

the right to assert their temporary presences and make their propositions known. So, as much as they may seek to engage with ongoing urban realities, as well as construct potential urban imaginaries, in a manner that will have an enduring impact on the town, they simultaneously draw their potency from both the eye-catching, momentary nature of the interruption they initiate – like a light suddenly going on – and a certain renegade quality that points to a form of ‘tactical urbanism’. Like the plight of the illegal fugitive, which is driven by economic and political necessities, tactical urbanism throws down an ethical challenge to the ritualised orthodoxies that prevail and is, as Saskia Sassen puts it, partly a practice that involves occupying. To occupy is to remake, even if temporarily, a bit of territory, and therewith to remake its embedded and often deeply undemocratic logics of power. This begins to redefine the role of citizens, mostly weakened and fatigued after decades of growing inequality and injustice.

(2014: 44)

But first, some background, not only on Folkestone as a place but also on the somewhat unlikely introduction to this urban environment on the UK’s south Kent coast of a Triennial event in 2008, one boasting commissioned works from artists of the highest international calibre and renown.

### **From ruination to repair**

Until the advent of an era of package holidays and cheap flights abroad in the 1960s, Folkestone had thrived since the nineteenth century as a seaside holiday resort for a broad constituency of lower to upper middle classes. Its role in this respect was evident in features such as a vast and vibrant amusement park in the Marine Parade area on its

western seafront, a carefully-landscaped coastal park and pebbled beach, with attendant bathing amenities stretching the length of the western undercliff, and an extensive leisure pier poking out into the sea. Contributing decisively to the development of Folkestone as popular resort and, indeed, rapidly growing residential location had been the arrival of the railways in the mid-nineteenth century. This saw the construction of the main line from London to the nearby port of Dover and, by century's end, the beginnings of cross-channel ferry traffic to the European continent. The present-day harbour arm, a central pier with a leftward kink, which was built effectively to create Folkestone's inner and outer harbour areas, had been acquired by the South Eastern Railway Company in 1842. Having bequeathed the town with what remains to this day the highest brick-arched railway viaduct in the world – set well back from the sea and looming large over the centre of the town – the company also diverted tracks down to the sea-front and built a two-platform railway station directly on the harbour pier. Here passengers from London could step off their trains and straight on to ferries to Europe (and vice versa). While it endured nearly a century, Folkestone's ferry traffic to France has long since ceased, owing to a combination of the channel tunnel's inauguration in the 1990s and the fact of the far larger port of Dover – a few miles east along the coastline – being able to operate a 24-hour cross-channel service, since, unlike Folkestone, its harbour was not tidal.

By the advent of the twenty-first century Folkestone had clearly relinquished its sense of purpose and identity as a place to live and work, let alone visit. Many of the buildings in the central area, above all on the main arteries of Tontine Street, which leads up from the harbour front, and the adjacent cobbled incline that is Old High Street, were dilapidated

and boarded up. Local unemployment was high, with key industries, services and businesses in the town having gone to the wall. Educational achievement was statistically of the lowest standard in the country, implying bleak post-school prospects for young people.

Stepping into the gloomy breach in 2004, however, was an archetypal ‘local boy made good’ entrepreneur with a conscience, one Sir Roger De Haan, the former owner of the renowned Saga empire, a family business which he had just sold for £1.35 billion.<sup>N2</sup> As a committed cultural patron, he has been centrally involved not only in putting up the finance in Folkestone but also in determining how his investment was to be implemented, resolving to establish the aptly-named Creative Foundation, which is governed by the Board of the Roger de Hann Charitable Trust. The Foundation’s executive strategy was essentially to galvanise the town by devising and nurturing a raft of key project initiatives based around the arts, creative industries and education.<sup>N3</sup>

One central aim of the Foundation from the beginning was to develop a creative quarter in the central area of the town around Tontine Street and this has been underpinned by a committed policy of buying up derelict properties in this area – of which there are many – restoring them and re-letting them at reasonable, affordable rates exclusively to artists as studios or to creative enterprises or initiatives. Since the introduction of the first Triennial in 2008 this has led to an explosion of activity and a general sense of vitality directly associated with the resurrection and repair of these ruinous properties. The increased presence and circulation of both locals and visitors in the area has, in turn, had the effect



of spawning new cafés, bars and restaurants. There are, of course, potential dangers associated with such radical urban renewal initiatives, relating to the displacement of local inhabitants and the erasure of a place's intrinsic sense of itself. However, the all-too-familiar tale of gentrification and the implementation of a business-stoking 'creative economy' approach, in which art and creativity are arguably hijacked in order to entice and generate economic rather than socio-cultural 'capital', appears *not* to be the order of the day. Indeed, if the actual phenomenon of illegal squatting as tactical urbanism – which I have invoked in *figurative* terms in my introductory comments – arises in the realm of housing as a consequence of inadequate formal policy and provision, here, arguably, is an instance of an enlightened official strategy.

The inauguration of the Folkestone Triennial represents a further key project initiative of de Hann's Creative Foundation.<sup>N4</sup> Curated in its first two incarnations in 2008 and 2011 by Andrea Schlieker, it has operated a policy of commissioning some twenty artworks each time, of which certain ones are identified as practically viable and worthy of retention beyond the culmination of the Triennial event itself. Thus, a productive tension arises between making a virtue of ephemerality on the one hand, as I have posited in terms of sited artworks practising a form of illegal, temporary squatting, and the enduring *work* (as in labour) of art in the reconstitution of urban identity. After two Triennials sixteen pieces had been acquired as permanent installations in the town, with a further nine in view to be retained from the 2014 edition. While for some local artists and residents the approach of the Triennial organisers has been seen as a top-down invasion by outsiders, it is also evident that the sense of disquiet and opposition arising on this

basis has had the positive effect of fuelling its own creative initiatives with the development of a popular fringe arts movement in the town that sustains itself beyond just the limited period of the Triennial event. By the time of the third Triennial in 2014, moreover, the representation of local artists *within* the parameters of the official event was beginning to make its presence felt to a significant degree.

But it is also true to say that the conscious intention of the curatorial approach has been to reach decisively beyond the specificity of Folkestone, not only by finding common thematic cause around notions of time and space – artworks ‘resonating with many universal issues’, as Schlieker puts it (2008, 12) – but also by presenting ‘an ambitious exhibition of newly created works for the public realm, which furthers the debate about place-making and makes explicit the dramatic changes in public art over the last twenty years’ (12). While there have been varying curatorial emphases from one Triennial to the next, to say nothing of the two quite distinct curator figures involved thus far, it would not be misrepresenting the situation to maintain that the prevalent tenor of all three has been to resist parochial introspection and instead position both Folkestone as a place and the artworks of its Triennial within a broader conceptual complex. So, it is suggested in general terms, the town’s intrinsic circumstances – its particular problems and culture – are not merely its own personal lookout; that is, all of its own making and, therefore, its exclusive responsibility. Instead they relate also to questions and situations arising and affected by a ‘global elsewhere’. It follows then that the site-responsive installations by visiting artists are not solely about the town either but are also engaged with timely questions about both the shifting state of the world and, following from this, the changing

aesthetics of contemporary public art-making, and perhaps sculpture as a form in particular. The ensuing analysis of selected works will illuminate both of these points. N5

The key to a rescue from ruination towards repair was, then, to look *outwards* and to seek to conceive of Folkestone's future morphogenetically as part of an ecology of fast-moving, challenging geo-political conditions. Moreover, an important principle of urban regeneration was thereby being asserted wherein it was not architects, designers and planners who were the first to be invited in to introduce fresh, galvanising perspectives about the future of the town, but *artists*. N6 And their methodological points of departure, or – to borrow a term from Deleuze and Guattari – projected 'lines of flight', were conjectural *imaginaries* relating to place and people, as opposed to pragmatic solutions towards the reconstruction of buildings and urban infrastructure. What follows is the analytical delineation of an elevated complex or 'high line' narrative of sited artworks N7 – 'subject to gravity and revealed by light', as William Tucker once proffered as a definition of the condition of sculpture (1975, 7) – which is driven critically by the question: what does it propose? Or, more performatively: what does it *do*?

### **Wither the weather**

Because it is England that we're talking about, let us begin briefly with the weather. 'Weather is a third to place and time' is a coinage of the artist-poet Ian Hamilton Finlay and, although the artist himself passed away in 2006, his words have been specially 'looked out' from his writings by the curator of the 2014 Triennial, Lewis Biggs – a 'detached sentence' as he puts it (2014, 5) – and inscribed in capitals on the shore-facing

side of the small white lighthouse at the tip of Folkestone's harbour arm. So, this is where our 'elevated trail' sets off, succinctly setting the tone. Looking north there is the broad, undulating sprawl of the town draped over a momentary dip in the cliffs of the South Kent coastline; looking south we have the vast stretch of the English Channel. A lighthouse is perfect, of course, not only as a form of fulcrum or kingpin for an event entitled *Lookout* but also as the location at which to reflect fleetingly upon this artist's particular 'proposition', which, as well as gesturing as a thought experiment towards the possibility of weather being 'a third' factor in a consideration of the dimensions of time and place, also neatly forms, precisely as a clear *proposition*, the third part of Biggs's aforementioned triangulation (2014, 4). The flashing or sweeping light pattern of a lighthouse at night re-invokes the notion of sited art offering a 'momentary illumination'.

**Fig 1. *Weather is a Third to Place and Time*, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Folkestone Triennial 2014.**

With the French coastline providing, on a clear day, what might be called (paradoxically) a 'real' *trompe l'oeil* horizon, and the wind almost inevitably whistling about your ears as you stand out on the pier, the combined expanse of sea and sky forms a veritable 'theatre of the weather' in which the spectator can observe, indeed *feel*, this drama of affect unfold in all its nuanced, seasonal variations. As such, Finlay's aphorism, asserting the significance of the weather as a vital and defining inflection of place and time, turns out to be far more than mere sentiment here but *materially* present as a changing choreography of water, air and light. The context performs these words for the spectator 'for real', turning it into a haptic and, indeed, emotional experience that makes its case

relating to the unexpected and powerful effects of the weather – and by extension *climate* – all the more forcefully. And, precisely on account of the visceral, enhanced sense of embodied exposure to and dependency on weather – framed as an influential natural force unstoppably and inevitably coming towards the town from afar, from ‘over the horizon’ – the raw phenomenological experience paves the way in turn towards metaphorical conjecture or ‘flights of fancy’: what other affective ‘forces’ are headed this way? What other kinds of ‘weather’ are there and how do they interact with place and time?

Weather as metaphor sends us flying (as the crow) to the polar opposite end of town, to *Withervanes* by the artist duo rooftopwo, comprised of Cézanne Charles and John Marshall. If the materiality of natural elements is pivotal in the performance of Finlay’s text (as facilitated by the location of the harbour arm lighthouse), this roof-top installation of headless chickens-cum-weathervanes proposes a ‘new sculptural materiality’, which, paradoxically, gradually reveals the ominous potency of its form to be precisely *immaterial*. Referencing the visible prevalence of conventional weathervanes in Folkestone, there are five such alternative *withervanes* – essentially smooth, peppermint-white sculptures of cockerels without heads (usually on trestle-plinths) – dotted around in raised locations of the town centre, the first being on the roof of the Red Cow Inn on Foord Road just to the north of the town’s imposing Victorian railway viaduct. At night they can be seen to light up in various garish neon colours which, like the sculptures themselves, appear to rotate. What makes the *withervanes* move, however, is nothing to do with the passing breeze of local weather conditions as such but relates instead to the

installation's subtitle: *a Neurotic Early Worrying System*. If we're talking 'weather' at all, then, it is generated by the immaterial 'climate of fear' that seems to characterise the operation of internet newsfeeds. So, this network of *withervanes* (or lookouts) – each individual one is also in communication with the others via WiFi, instantly sharing incoming data – monitors global newsfeeds and has been programmed to respond to certain pre-set words and phrases that invoke fear: 'natural disaster', 'economic collapse', 'war' and so on (Biggs 2014, 22). Varying intensities of internet 'fear-mongering' accordingly induce the 'emotionally-sensitive' *withervane* to swivel and point 'headlessly' away from the global origin of the newsfeed in question at differing speeds – the more alarmist the news, the faster it goes – while changing colours similarly represent a 'fear index' of five levels of alert: severe (red), high (orange), elevated (yellow), guarded (blue) and low (green). Members of the public too can get in on the act of contributing, via an app on their smartphones, to the various tempers of this collective and neurotic 'worrying system'. They have the choice of influencing the anxiety levels of individual *withervanes* either positively (relatively speaking), by texting 'Keep calm and carry on', or negatively, by sending the message 'The sky is falling', thus enhancing the atmosphere of emotional panic. Both effects are relayed subsequently to the rest of the network, producing a form of aggregated frenzy that serves no useful purpose other than to perpetuate a sense of nervous disorientation and bemusement: headless cockerels that cannot crow, whose sole capacity is to 'express the sense of panic that corporations and governments use to keep consumer-citizens acquiescent' (Biggs 2014, 20).

Fig 2. *Withervanes 1-5: a Neurotic Early Worrying System (no.1 Red Cow Inn),*  
rootoftwo, Folkestone Triennial 2014.

While rooftoptwo's installation is clearly light hearted – and the degree of public participation, insofar as the invitation to interact would even be registered by the casual passer-by, is tokenistic at best (perhaps that is exactly its point...) – it draws a clever analogy between the properties and effects of natural weather on the one hand and the human-made ether or *cloud* that is the global realm of the digital information and communications jet-stream on the other. Both are enormously powerful affective influences based on the complex way they are constituted and in their widespread impact on civilisation. Social media and the internet in general evidently have a lot to answer for in the way they can be used to stoke and manipulate fear in order to nurture a perversely dependent, complicit and, ultimately, subordinate populace. Like the weather, then, we are, arguably, at the mercy of cyberspace. It represents the 'new normal' and, like it or not, we cannot afford to lump it. Both phenomena appear to be relentless and inevitable and, therefore, supposedly beyond the immediate influence of humanity. They are simply there. They happen. But, in fact, as the performance of Finlay's lighthouse subtly proposes, even a natural phenomenon like the weather is itself symptomatic of, or subject to, all kinds of practices in which humanity plays an irresponsible, detrimental part: 'crowded shipping lanes, tidal erosion and energy, climate change and altering sea-levels, air and ocean pollution, all seem very close', Biggs maintains (2014, 5). So, in another sense it is precisely *our* lookout: we get the kind of weather we deserve; the choice whether to abuse natural resources or harness their properties positively is humanity's. And, so it is with the internet: in itself a magnificent human invention, but, as our

*withervanes* tell us, prone to be contaminated and misused, subjecting us in commodified form to affective tyrannies of fear.

### **Come high winds and water**

A few metres from the first *withervane* on the roof of the Red Cow Inn, the first *Pent House* is also to be found. It's a replica Manhattan water tower with a shiny steel finish, elevated on a truss amidst the clustered signage of a small triangular traffic island at the intersection of four streets. Just as there are five *withervanes* sited strategically around the town, so there are five *Pent Houses*. The latter demarcate a line of flight straight back down to Folkestone's inner harbour, but this landscaped installation has nothing to do with routes taken by crows (or headless chickens for that matter) and everything to do with the town's origins. For the Pent is Folkestone's river and the principal reason why the town came into being as a Roman settlement in the first place. In the industrial boom-time years of the nineteenth century when the advent of the railways facilitated its transition from modest or – to cite Defoe (as quoted in Newman 1983, 326) – 'miserable' fishing town, the Pent's currents were used to power Folkestone's mills and the river provided quick access to the tidal harbour and the sea. As these industries dwindled, though, so the Pent gradually withdrew its labour so to speak, eventually becoming culverted and forgotten – Folkestone's little underground secret. As such the river's fortunes serve as a resonant synecdoche of the town itself: a vital force whose energy has been rendered obsolete.

**Fig 3. *Pent Houses 1-5*, Diane Dever and Jonathan Wright, Folkestone Triennial 2014.**



In Diane Dever's and Jonathan Wright's five-part installation the water towers come in various material shapes and sizes. One, set back in the vacant space left by the First World War bombing of a building at the lower end of Tontine Street, is made of wood – as the original ones in New York City are – and, via a ladder leading into its bowels, it affords access to visitors, conveying the feeling of entering a loft. The artwork as a whole draws attention not only to the rather startling fact of the river's hidden but continuing existence in the town but also to Folkestone's history, paradoxically permitting an 'unknown memory' to seep into public consciousness. But why, in particular, the combined invocation of Manhattan water towers and exclusive penthouse suites? A clue can certainly be discovered via Rachel Whiteread's 1998 *Water Tower* installation on the rooftop of 60 Grand Street in the SoHo area of Manhattan itself, thus clearly positioning issues arising here under local circumstances within a global context. In this case it has less to do with attributing local effects to global forces (although ultimately that may be in play as well), than gesturing towards similarities relating to the commodification of both water and housing. Water towers are ubiquitous, of course, on the New York City skyline and doubtless something of a rough-hewn oddity amidst the slick, hi-tech skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan: distinctly out of place as both an architectural anachronism and as an essentially rustic construct – 'between a yurt and an outhouse', as Sante puts it (1999, 89). But because they've seemingly always been there – part of the urban furniture so to speak – providing a functioning engineering solution to the problem of water pressure in tall buildings, their presence somehow remains beyond question: they are simultaneously integral and anonymous. Nevertheless, Whiteread's *Water Tower* – which was cast in translucent resin according to her signature technique of solidifying

the ‘interior air’ of actual-size objects and constructions, and installed on the vacated iron truss of a former water tower – seeks to perform an act of memory that plays on a perceived disappearance or dissipation. Drawing attention to something perennial yet taken for granted, and therefore invisible, via an aesthetic mechanism that gives material substance to ‘air’ – or a phantom presence to absence – has the effect of highlighting the water tower’s significance not only as an essential, functioning contributor to the life of the city but also as a landmark container of an urban history that is fast being forgotten and replaced. Situated in the renowned but dwindling artists’ quarter of SoHo, whose erstwhile inhabitants were steadily and cynically priced out of their apartments, studios and galleries by a rampant, gentrifying property market, it is not difficult to establish the symbolic link between the effects of urban real estate management and Whiteread’s *Water Tower* installation whose ghostly afterimage evokes precariousness and warns of the cost of ruthlessly-imposed economic change. Moreover, the artwork materialised only a couple of years after Whiteread’s notoriously controversial *House* project (1993) in a working-class neighbourhood of East London which witnessed, first, the demolition of terraced housing and, second, on the instructions of the local council, the demolition of the artist’s prize-winning memorial installation to the community affected by the first effacement.

Dever’s and Wright’s *Pent Houses* effectively reprises the link between private property and water towers within the context of Folkestone – the reappearance of a phantom presence – but also finesses the specific role of water by explicitly highlighting its intrinsic value as a natural resource that can find itself made similarly subject to

indiscriminate forms of capitalist appropriation. Thus, as Folkestone embarks on a path of regeneration, the forgotten waters of the River Pent – which eventually flows into the inner harbour basin, where the fifth and final *Pent House* is located – re-emerge as a potential source of real estate exploitation in their capacity to enhance the value of the creative quarter's desirable properties, whether that be in the form of renovated existing ones or those yet to be built as part of a comprehensive harbour development.<sup>N8</sup> On one level, then, the artists' water towers invoke a memory of the town's water as a free and natural resource throughout history; on another, their strategic installations point to the very real dangers of a contained 'housing' or 'housifying' of water as a utility: a cynical, gentrified co-opting of its rich, free-flowing attributes that is both symbolically reminiscent of the way the commercial property market intrinsically operates in relation to the question of housing as a resource and in the *actual* interests of private ownership exercised by a handful of wealthy landlords.

If Folkestone's invisible river meanders its way unobtrusively down to the sea, the railway viaduct with its 'nineteen brick arches monumentally spanning the Foord Valley, nearly 100 feet high in the centre' poses a radically antithetical presence (Newman 1983, 326). Designed by William Cubitt circa 1843 its visual dominance of the townscape is testament to the difference it once made to the place: 'It is only justice that the viaduct should be so impressive, for the railway made Folkestone' (326). That difference was dependent, of course, on an additional track being dropped down the cliffs to the harbour pier, thus embedding the railways in the heart of the town and establishing a direct sea link to Europe. Ironically, with that feeder track – once featuring the celebrated Orient

Express train to Istanbul – now shut down, the imposing viaduct, which witnesses trains flitting regularly between London and Dover, stands more as a signifying monument to Folkestone’s present-day obsolescence – a place to pass by and *over*, rapidly. And, just to pile irony on irony, Britain’s first high speed rail track (HS1) and the vehicle-transporting Eurotunnel company, which seek to inject maximum efficiency to train connections with Europe, run to and from, as well as through a station called Folkestone just off the M20 motorway, yet have little, if anything, to do with the town itself.

Fig 4. *The Wind Lift*, Marjetica Potrč and Ooze (comprising Eva Pfannes and Sylvain Hertenberg), Folkestone Triennial 2014.

So, if the viaduct has succeeded, in the twenty-first century, in upholding a narrative of efficient transportation begun nearly two centuries ago, it has not taken Folkestone with it on that journey. However, for Marjetica Potrč and Ooze (comprising Eva Pfannes and Sylvain Hertenberg) the presence of the viaduct offered an alternative possibility which would, on the one hand, pay homage to its place in history as a striking feat of engineering whose introduction revolutionised the life of the town, and, on the other, propose a radical refunctioning of its original purpose, which might prove equally transformational. Where the arches of a viaduct are conventionally allocated a supporting role, as that which facilitates horizontal travel across the top of the structure, in this installation they themselves become the focal point – in more ways than one. Potrč’s and Ooze’s *The Wind Lift* not only enables *vertical* travel instead, inviting contemplation of the sheer aesthetic and material magnificence of the viaduct as a structure, actually and symbolically ‘from below’, but also draws attention, again, to the implicit presence of an

invisible, untapped natural force in the town, namely the powerful winds that are channelled through these nineteen gaping arches. Thus the *voids* created by the arches are as significant as the brickwork structure itself. And, to hark back in spirit to Ian Hamilton Finlay's sentiments inscribed on the harbour lighthouse, here the weather that produces those invisible gusting winds truly is the unseen third dimension of place and time,

The wind lift itself is a passenger lift, an open viewing platform that rises some twenty-five metres in the air up a slender gantry structure that flanks one of the central pillars of the viaduct. It is powered entirely by a small turbine that is suspended in midair within one of the main arches, harnessing the wind as it sweeps in from the sea. Thus, the lift is pleasingly self-contained; in order to fulfil its function of affording groups of visitors both close-up views of the brickwork and a panoramic lookout position over the town and the sea, it generates all its own power. Of course, by the artists' own admission, that also implies that 'the number of rides depends on the strength of the wind' (Biggs 2014, 28). As such it makes a positive and convincing point relating not only to the need for clean energy use but also to the viable and exciting *potential* of harvesting available but unexploited environmentally friendly natural resources to constructive ends. Some have questioned the latter, pointing out that there is an element of Sisyphean futility to the exercise: all that generating and capturing of energy to go no-where much (except up and down) and merely for the sake a view.<sup>N9</sup> But that is to overlook not only the affective pleasure of the visual aesthetic experience – to say nothing of the sheer fairground thrill involved – but also to underestimate the value of the artwork as an incredibly neat and elegant conceptual proposal for better living – the kind of lateral, creative thinking that

would give the whole town a lift, in fact. While scientists and engineers envisage the future as one of high speed electronic transportation and communications, here is a vision – an artist’s proposition – that, in its own subtle way, is arguably even further ahead in the game of anticipating the future through the sheer scope of its inventiveness – one that makes canny use precisely of the instruments of engineering and science – and its sense of ethical responsibility to humanity and the natural environment of the planet in general, as well as Folkestone in particular.

### **Transient nestings: a conclusion**

As a form of extended conclusion to this curated narrative of the lie of the Folkestone land, we find ourselves back at the sea front where two artworks contemplate one another diametrically across the tidal waters of the inner harbour area and, as such, can be made to enter into productive conversation with one another. Exemplifying in this capacity one of the main concerns of this article, which has been to draw out, via multiple triangulations, how sited artworks engage critically with shared urban contexts, both installations also encapsulate several other of the key thematic threads outlined in the introduction and therefore serve, in combination, as fitting endpoints to this elevated excursion. For one, both address the ‘lookout’ theme of the Triennial in a range of immediate and distinctive ways, not only embracing it as subject-matter and form but also underscoring the particular contribution artists, in their role as lookouts, can make to envisioning urban futures. For another, they both entertain related notions of temporary ‘squatting’. For a third, the pieces very much take the locality as their respective points of departure, yet also position Folkestone within a wider, changing global framework. And,

finally, they epitomise the changing nature of public art-making, taking into account, for instance, conventions of performance and notions of a participatory ‘spectator’s turn’ in which it becomes quite literally the spectator’s turn to precipitate the significance of the artwork.

**Fig 5. *The Electrified Line (Cross-track Observation-deck)*, Gabriel Lester, Folkestone Triennial 2014.**

The subtitle of Gabriel Lester’s *The Electrified Line* installation is *Cross-track Observation-deck* and this enclosed, yet open and airy bamboo pavilion is a raised platform structure which invites entry to the public via a wooden set of stairs. Importantly, it sits squarely on the disused railway tracks at the head of the viaduct – a far more modest one than Foord Valley – that bisects the inner and outer harbours and leads across to the former station on the harbour arm where we began. Alex Hartley’s *Vigil*, meanwhile, was a durational performance piece involving the artist himself at intervals, along with a rotating group of volunteer assistants. For the entire nine-week period of the Triennial at least one person remained ensconced at all times in a ‘vertical campsite’ or ‘portledge’, to use the mountaineer’s technical term, hanging off the side of the flat roof of the all-white Grand Burstin Hotel. The latter is a veritable mountain of a building that dominates Folkestone’s sea front, with a sweeping view of the whole harbour area, the town centre and the English Channel. In fact, while *Vigil* certainly framed the 14-storey Grand Burstin as an Alpine construct via its recognisable use of mountaineering paraphernalia, the form of the hotel itself is perhaps more nautical, thus simultaneously evoking the image of a multi-deck cruise liner waiting to head out to sea. This chimes, in

turn, with the perception of Hartley's installation as a form of 'crow's nest', on the one hand looking out over the horizon for encroaching danger and, on the other, keeping watch over the goings-on in the town.

Fig 6. *Vigil*, Alex Hartley, Folkestone Triennial 2014.

*Vigil's* figurative duality is echoed in the concept of Lester's installation, whose 'observation deck' implicitly references nautical navigation, while 'cross-track' evidently refers to the obsolete railway line upon which the entire pavilion structure perches. Thus, one form of transportation meets another head on. Coincidentally it emerged during the making of the piece that there once was a wooden tower positioned right in that spot to hold watch over the various comings and goings of the harbour area (Biggs 2014, 6). It would not be stretching a point to suggest the intricate and meticulously slotted together bamboo scaffolding similarly brings to mind a bird's nest, with its formal construction providing a secure and strategic, seasonal – that is, *temporary* – home. And, when I say strategic, I do mean to evoke a sense of the way that birds carefully scout around for an appropriate location for their nest-building, but also thereby to emphasise the way that *The Electrified Line* and *Vigil* have chosen to lodge themselves – to *occupy* or *squat* – in sites that reveal specific local and political sensitivities. These tactical interventions represent, then, clear attempts to put artistic fingers on the urban pulse and to engage in a conversation – with the town and, why not, with one another – about what dangers and opportunities Folkestone's future holds in the larger scheme of things.



If Potrč's and Ooze's *Wind Lift* contrasted sharply with the monumental, if elegant, brickwork of the Foord Valley viaduct, thereby drawing attention to an untapped and free natural energy source, Lester's utilisation of bamboo makes a similarly antithetical proposal relating to the future of global material resources. While bamboo is intended symbolically to foresee 'the coming Chinese century' – Lester himself spent time living in China (Biggs 2014, 52) – the material lightness and flexibility, as well as simple aesthetic gracefulness with which the structure rests upon the stolid brickwork of the nineteenth-century harbour viaduct also points to the potential for a new *enlightened* way of conceiving of the built environment. Importantly, bamboo is super light, yet at the same time super sturdy and durable. Thus, with a warm breeze gently kindling some wind chimes, those of us who gather here on this particular lookout platform – this temporary haven of contemplation, placed subtly but provocatively astride the overgrown and rusting, yet beautiful ruins of the railway tracks – are invited to reflect in tranquillity upon the promise of an improved urban environment. Like Potrč's and Ooze's wind power, which neatly generates its own clean electricity in implied counterpoint to the polluting, fossil fuel-driven exploits of the industrial age, Lester provides a performative space – a transient one that is both social and domestic – for us to look out and re-imagine how this once-electrified, mini-Chinese Wall of a viaduct, extending to the harbour arm, might be re-purposed in the common interests of the town's citizens – perhaps, like Manhattan's High Line (see n.7), as a public promenade. So, it is a deliberate squatting which senses that the lurking temptations of commercial, real estate interests – such as we saw implicitly being addressed in Dever's and Wright's *Pent Houses*, whose fifth water tower is but a pebbles throw from Lester's installation – may

end up taking precedence over that which should be regarded as civic property. The installation's very transience as a dwelling, coupled with the lightness of its material, propose a similar adaptability of future use, one that avoids being subject to the heavy-handed, closed-off rigidities and exclusivities of private ownership.

Hartley too scents looming perils along these lines and therefore counsels eagle-eyed caution. As indicated already, his colourful encampment invokes the trappings of mountaineering, but its accompanying banners simultaneously recall recent Occupy-style 'dug-in' demonstrations, such as those in Manhattan's Zuccotti Park or in front of St Paul's Cathedral in London (in 2011). In an age of renewed public street protest, occurring across the globe for a whole range of reasons, it clearly represents a socio-political protest of sorts whose protagonist plays in part on the irony of having a whole grand hotel full of comfortable rooms from which to choose, but defiantly insists on pitching his humble solo tent in circumstances of high-risk and physical exposure to the elements. Evidently the installation has the corrosive effects on the town of mass tourism in its sights, but it also appears implicitly to renounce the mass protest aspect of these global demonstrations, if not their anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist sentiments. Instead, seeking to resist perhaps any 'spectacle of false togetherness' (to borrow a phrase from Guy Debord) or, indeed, the knee-jerk platitudes of twitter-style mass protest, the lone performer asserts the right to the integrity of solitary protest based on quiet self-reflection in a necessarily isolated space of calm, thus echoing the one-time perception of the introspective medieval hermit as 'prophet and visionary' (Biggs 2014, 6 and 64).<sup>N10</sup> Moreover, *Vigil* presents an omniscient vantage point over the town which paradoxically

inverts the disciplinary gaze of mass surveillance. Rather than spying covertly on the citizens of the town from above, as CCTV cameras do – supposedly in their best interests, but more likely so as to ensure the maintenance of the built environment as a ‘safe space of consumption’ – the installation draws attention instead to *its* position on high: its protest, its sacrifice, its temporary *squatting* of this 1970s carbuncle of profit-making real estate, with its ‘crude and silly detailing’ (Newman 1983, 328).

As with the other artworks in this elevated excursion, *Vigil* represents a form of appeal from the crow’s nest to the good citizens of the town that this is the Folkestone future that may be on the horizon unless they exercise vigilance and hold their seemingly well-intentioned benefactors to account. Like rooftoptwo’s *Withervanes*, it represents an ‘early worrying system’, but where that work jokingly refers to itself as ‘neurotic’ in response to a phenomenon – fear-mongering newsfeeds – that has already firmly cast its spell, inducing a form of pathological acquiescence, *Vigil* demarcates an open terrain of non-coercive circumspection in which the possibility of a pre-emptive mindset comes into view. From a commanding position of omniscience over the town, it exemplifies, then, what the art of a triennial such as Folkestone’s *Lookout* can do, enacting a form of subversive counter-surveillance which proposes that the onus of *observation* lies within that that is perceived to be the common purpose of the public – a gaze *between* citizens that is met, ultimately, at ground level and induces ‘conversations’.

## Notes

1. Signalling like beacons from the tops of buildings recalls Trish Brown's 1973 *Roof Piece* performed by a dozen dancers, clad in red and following one another's movements as closely as possible while dotted across the skyline of lower Manhattan.
2. Famously Saga made its name and money as a pioneer of mass tourism, providing affordable package and cruise holidays abroad for the over-50s from the 1960s onwards.
3. One of the most high profile of these was the commissioning of a new state secondary school building from Norman Foster Architects.
4. The other comparable initiative has been the opening of a new arts centre, the Quarterhouse on Tontine Street.
5. The 2014 Triennial hosted a conference at the Quarterhouse entitled *The Sculpture Question* addressing precisely this issue (1-2 November). A keynote by the then Director of Tate Britain, Penelope Curtis, began by querying that there even was a 'question' and ended by asking, in a manner that clearly betrayed her own sense of regret, whether sculpture had moved into an 'expanded field' or merely effaced itself to other media, becoming 'everything and nothing' in the process. In its manifesto *The New Rules of Public Art*, the Bristol-based arts organisation Situations (with Claire Doherty) similarly dismisses the need for such a question but for quite different reasons, polemically urging

‘Don’t waste time on definitions: Is it sculpture? Is it visual art? Is it performance? Who cares! There are more important questions to ask’. (Situations 2013: 16). Tellingly, for Situations some further axioms are: ‘It doesn’t have to look like public sculpture’ (2) and ‘It’s not forever’ (4). See also Doherty’s recent *Out of Time, Out of Place: Public Art (Now)* (2015) for a more extensive disquisition on these ideas.

6. At another conference run at Quarterhouse by the Triennial in 2014, *Imagined Cities* (11-12 October), Mark Davy of the architects group Future Cities described how artists always ended up as the ‘poor relations’ of designers, engineers and planners when it came to architecture projects. In the major Cross Rail underground project currently digging its way through central London, Future Cities insisted on having artists involved as key contributors from the beginning, less for the public art they might produce and site than for the value of their particular vision.

7. I use the term ‘high line’ here deliberately to invoke the spectre of New York City’s High Line, the elevated metropolitan train network whose tracks hover above the streets of the city. Having become disused and overgrown with plant life, part of it, in the Chelsea district of Lower Manhattan’s west side, has been repurposed as a highly popular sculpture trail and parkland area that marks out and defines the immediate vicinity. Folkestone’s close association with the railways, with its tracks dominating the townscape in several ways, as we shall see, emphasises the relevance of the analogy, to say nothing of the fact that Rachel Whiteread’s *Water Tower* installation, to which I refer later, was sited in nearby SoHo.

8. Roger de Haan acquired Folkestone Harbour in its entirety for the sum of £11 million after selling off Saga in 2004. Terry Farrell Architects has been commissioned to develop a master-plan for the development of the sea front and harbour arm area.

9. The organisers of the Triennial had a considerable battle on their hands convincing the residents of the adjacent Bradstone Court flats that their private lives were not about to become exposed to a succession of visitors peering into bedrooms from the open lift.

10. One can't help see in *Vigil* a 21<sup>st</sup> century counterpoint to (if not parody of) the romanticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich in which solitary figures are seen to confront, or be confronted by, a vision of nature's sublime elemental magnitude. Revealing only their backs as they look out into the vast landscape – which implicitly positions them as proxies of the spectator's view – Friedrich's lone individuals are very much situated at the centre of these depictions of the overwhelming forces of nature. As such the moods evoked appear to be ambiguous: both natural spectacle, the witnessing of which reduces the solitary human to insignificance, and a powerful, even masterful projection of inner emotion. In fact, *Vigil* appears to conflate two well-known Friedrich paintings: on the one hand the signature *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), with its protagonist's omniscient perspective of the mountain peaks poking through a blanket of mist and, on the other, *Monk by the Sea* (1809) in which a lone figure on the beach appears about to be sucked dramatically into a

one-point perspective vortex of sea and cloud. Each in their own way invoke a powerful sense of unknown futures.

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